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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 001731

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN, DRL
NSC FOR DAVID MERKEL
USMISSION OSCE FOR KIT TRAUB

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SUBJECT: ARMENIA: LOCAL ELECTIONS SERIOUSLY FLAWED

REF: YEREVAN 1593

Classified By: CDA A.F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4(b,d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Local election monitors, news media, and our own employees are among the growing chorus of critics of "widespread violations" in local Armenian elections, currently being held across the country on a rolling schedule from September 18 through October 23. Local elections have spurred accusations of voting list inaccuracies, police interference, ballot box stuffing, illegal campaigning, abuse of proxy rights, and other violations of electoral procedures.

PRESIDENT KOCHARIAN: LOCAL ELECTIONS "NORMAL"

12. (C) During September 25 elections in the "Kentron" community of Yerevan where President Robert Kocharian and Defense Minister Serzh Sargsyan voted, Kocharian told reporters that despite some complications with new requirements for "seals and signatures" local elections are "normal." In a September 26 press conference, Council of Europe observers said they noted "fewer violations" than in past elections, a weak validation of Kocharian's claims.

SOME VOTERS DISAGREE WITH KOCHARIAN'S ANALYSIS

13. (C) Several of Post's local employees complained that voter lists, which record eligible voters by household, included as residents of their homes people they did not know. They said that, in the absence of voting booths, election commission officials watched them closely as they voted and prevented them from sealing their ballots. Other local embassy employees complained that election officials turned them away from the polls after their names had been inexplicably removed from their relevant voting list.

PARLIAMENT OPENS SESSION: CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS ON TAP

14. (C) On September 27, Parliament returned in extraordinary session for hearings on the GOAM Law on Referendums and to ultimately take up the Council of Europe (CoE) Venice Commission-approved constitutional amendment package in a third, and final, pro forma reading. In the opening session, opposition members continued their boycott-breaking criticism of the Kocharian Administration (reftel) and cited "widespread irregularities" in the administration of local elections as evidence that the GOAM is not committed to a democratic Armenia with free and fair elections. Parliament returns on September 28 to continue debating.

COMMENT: LOCAL ELECTIONS A LIKELY SIGN OF THINGS TO COME

15. (C) Reminiscent of the 2003 presidential and parliamentary elections and likely a forecast of the November constitutional amendments referendum (reftel), the local elections have already spurred accusations of irregularities from international and domestic elections monitors, news media, and the public at large. With GOAM support, the USG is launching a new set of programs aimed at establishing stronger democratic institutions in Armenia. None of these programs, however, will have had a chance to change the environment before the November referendum to change Armenia's constitution.
GODFREY